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Chapter 1

A few days before Rosekit and Dawnkit's apprentice ceremonies...

The pigeon pecked mindlessly among the roots of the Sun Oak, letting out the occasional *coo*ing sound. Leaves on the forest floor rustled faintly as the bird dug among the foliage in search of food. It wasn't long before it raised its head with a decently sized worm clutched in its beak.

Just as the prey prepared to take flight, its predator darted out of a nearby bush, pinning it to the ground in a heartbeat. Claws flashed across its neck. The pigeon squawked feebly as blood oozed from the wound, and it began to die slowly.

Minnowpaw sat up, her paws still pinning the bird by its wings. She watched triumphantly as her catch's struggles quickly grew weaker until they were gone altogether.

These birds are so dumb, she thought with mild amusement. *Which makes them easy to catch. Lucky us!*

Examining the pigeon, she noted that it was fat enough to feed all the elders, just as Thumpstep requested. Her mentor had taken her out here to test her hunting skills once more, and because the elders hadn't eaten much today, and deserved fresh prey. Minnowpaw hoped they would enjoy the pigeon—Brokenstem and Fernstripe, at least. She knew Ashwhisker well enough that she never expected her to be satisfied with anything, at least not openly.

Her ears pricked as more rustling in the grass announced Thumpstep's return. The big brown tabby was carrying a plump squirrel, which he set down. "Catch anything?" he prompted.

Minnowpaw stepped to the side and let the dead pigeon answer his question.

Thumpstep's yellow eyes narrowed. "Looks like it almost got away from you. It's bleeding a lot."

Minnowpaw shook her head. "No, it was an easy kill. I just clawed its throat instead of biting it."

"You shouldn't let your prey suffer if you don't have to," Thumpstep scolded her. "A quick bite to the neck is all that was needed."

"It's just a bird!" Minnowpaw protested. "Fresh-kill is fresh-kill, no matter how you take it down."

"It's not just a bird," Thumpstep meowed, "and prey in general is never just prey. Every morsel is a blessing from StarClan that we must be respectful of, because it can be taken from us as easily as we catch it. Did you give your thanks to StarClan when you caught it?"

Minnowpaw shook her head glumly.

"You need to learn to respect your prey, Minnowpaw," Thumpstep sighed. "It's part of the warrior code."

"Why is it part of the code?" Minnowpaw retorted. "I caught and killed the bird. I'll take it to the elders, they'll eat it and have full bellies. Boom. No thanks to StarClan given, and still no harm done. So why is it even necessary?"

"Because we're lucky StarClan let us eat at all," Thumpstep growled. "It may be greenleaf, but all our prey could still be gone in a matter of days. Disease could taint it, a fire could kill it all...*that's* why we give thanks to StarClan. To let them know we are aware of the blessing each piece of fresh-kill is."

"Oh, I'm sure they know, with all the Clans pointlessly thanking them fifty times a day," Minnowpaw muttered under her breath.

"That's enough!" Thumpstep said sharply. "I'll hear no more of this. We're taking our prey back to camp. You'll take the pigeon straight to the elders. And check them for ticks, while you're at it. If you won't show respect to your ancestors, at least show some to your elders."

Whether it's to show respect or not, checking the elders for ticks is a punishment, and I didn't even do anything wrong! I caught something for the elders just like Thumpstep wanted me to, and now he's mad at me because I didn't kill it the way he wanted. Why isn't he ever satisfied with me?

Minnowpaw wanted to say so many things about how unfair this was, but she forced herself to hold her tongue.

As Thumpstep padded back to his squirrel, he glanced at her pigeon. "Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," he said, "since my apprentice doesn't have the decency to do it herself."

Minnowpaw physically flinched at his scathing words, but he didn't look in her direction. He simply snatched up the squirrel and stalked off towards the SunClan camp. With a heavy sigh, she picked up her pigeon and trudged along a couple fox-lengths behind her mentor.

Briefly, she wondered if Thumpstep knew how much his words hurt, but she dismissed the thought as anger seethed in her belly. Even if he did know, it was obvious he didn't care.

* * *

Minnowpaw padded toward the elders' den, gingerly carrying a short stick in her jaws. The moss soaked in mouse bile was draped on one end of the twig, the awful smell drowning out any others. She could focus on almost nothing else but the stench, and how stupid this punishment was.

She noticed Nightpaw outside the apprentice den, saying something to Rosekit, one of two kits that would soon be apprentices, too. The tiny tortoiseshell dropped into a clumsy hunting crouch and began to creep forward. Nightpaw watched her with approval and a bit of amusement.

Angrily Minnowpaw turned her gaze away. *I bet the other apprentices are doing fun stuff, too,* she thought bitterly. *Training and being taught things that are actually useful. And here I am, about to scrape ticks out of the elders' fur for no good reason!*

Then something occurred to her. *Why don't* I *do something fun, too?* Suddenly she couldn't care less about what Thumpstep told her to do. Thumpstep was a mouse-brain too hyperfocused on the warrior code to actually *teach* her things, like advanced fighting moves, or how to climb trees. Why should she bother listening to him?

Minnowpaw's eyes were drawn to a small, barely visible hole near the elder den. It was a tunnel she'd found as a kit and had kept a secret from anyone else, even her brother Shadowpaw. She knew it led beneath the camp wall and out into the forest, but she'd never had a good opportunity to use it...until now!

Closing the distance between her and the den, Minnowpaw set down the twig and the wretched, mouse bile-covered moss it held in the grass, scraping some earth over it with a forepaw to disguise the awful smell. One glance over her shoulder told her no cat was paying her any mind, not even Thumpstep. *Especially* not Thumpstep, for he expected her to do anything and everything he told her, no questions asked. *Not this apprentice!*

Minnowpaw scurried to the camp wall and thrust herself through the tunnel before anyone did see her. A few moments later, she was out in SunClan's forest, vigorously shaking the dust from the tunnel off her pelt.

"Take that, Thumpstep," she muttered.

I think I'll just stroll through the forest, she mused. *Maybe bring some more prey back, too.* Whatever took her mind off this morning's hunting session was fine with her.

Now that she was away from the cramped, busy SunClan camp, the irate tension in Minnowpaw's muscles began to ease. It was often difficult for her to relax in camp when it was so loud and bustling, but she supposed all her Clanmates felt that way sometimes. Regardless, her mood was already improving. With an excited trill, she broke into a sprint, relishing the cool rush of air during these late greenleaf days.

This is way better than doing the elders' ticks in that muggy old den!

As she neared the Twolegplace, Minnowpaw slowed her pace to catch her breath. Almost immediately she heard undergrowth rattling, and a thrush sounded an alarm call close by.

What was all that? she wondered. Her heart jumped. *A hunting patrol? They might scent me!*

Minnowpaw scurried into the thickest patch of undergrowth she could find. She wanted to know what exactly made that thrush call out, but she really didn't want to be caught by a patrol and sent back to camp in more trouble than she left in. Still, curiosity—and the possibility of it being a trespasser on SunClan land—overcame her, and she stalked in the direction of the commotion.

Narrowing her eyes, Minnowpaw peered through the tall grass. Several fox-lengths ahead, she could see the dirty white fence that marked the end of the forest and the start of the Twolegplace. But what really caught her attention was the large blue-gray tom just two tail-lengths in front of her, with his head low as he sniffed the vole he'd clearly just killed. Despite his size, he looked young, perhaps a little older than her.

It is *a trespasser!* Minnowpaw's heart raced. The tom's scent was unlike that of any Clan—he seemed to have come from the Twolegplace—so she wondered if he even knew he was intruding. *And* stealing prey. No matter; soon he would get the memo straight from her!

Minnowpaw flew out from the grass, taking on a fighting stance right in front of the strange cat. Completely caught off guard, the tom hissed with surprise and sprang backwards, staring at her. *Obviously he doesn't come to the forest often. I would've expected him to smell me, at least!*

Out loud she demanded, "What do you think you're doing here?"

The blue-gray tom's eyes narrowed. They were a pale gold color, a bit like Thumpstep's. "You must be one of those wild cats that lives in this forest," he meowed with slight recognition. "Are you out here all on your own?"

"Don't dodge my question. What are you doing here?"

"Well—" the tom's eyes flitted to the dead vole that lay between them, "—I'm not completely sure, but I *think* this is called hunting. Wouldn't you know?" His tone dripped with sarcasm.

Minnowpaw dug her claws into the earth. This cat was getting on her nerves rather fast. "Of course I know. I mean, if you know there are wild cats here, then why are you trespassing?"

"I didn't realize I was," the tom responded. He sounded sincere, but Minnowpaw wasn't quite convinced.

She flicked her tail towards the spot she knew SunClan set their scent markers at. "So you didn't smell our markers right there? Are you sure your nose works?"

"Well, I found and caught that vole, so it works well enough."

"Speaking of, that would be SunClan prey. You can't have it." Minnowpaw took a step towards it, meaning to take it out of the tom's reach.

His ears flattened to his head, and she froze. Not because he appeared aggressive, but because he appeared...worried.

"Look, I don't want any trouble with you or that...SunClan you speak of. But I can't let you take that vole." There was an evasive edge to his tone, like he was reluctant to be saying this. "I have hungry mouths to feed."

Minnowpaw's curiosity was piqued. "There are more of you? Are you a father?"

"Do I look that old?" the tom asked wryly. "No, I'm not. But I live with other cats, in the neighborhood." He gestured to the Twolegplace with his tail. "And they need to eat."

He's like a warrior hunting for his own Clan, of sorts. Minnowpaw supposed there was nothing wrong with that; it was actually quite nice. But this was still SunClan territory.

"So why don't you just hunt in the neighborhood?" she asked, using the tom's word for the Twolegplace. "You live there. And, obviously, you wouldn't be stealing from us."

The tom sighed. His edge had returned. "We can't hunt in the neighborhood anymore. The prey is..." His bright eyes darkened with what Minnowpaw thought was grief. "...toxic. From eating the garbage the humans toss out. Cats die when they eat the prey now."

Something inside Minnowpaw cracked. Suddenly she noticed that, for all his size, she could still see the tom's ribs through his bluish pelt.

"Oh," she murmured. "You're starving."

"We're managing," the tom said defensively.

Yep. They're starving.

"You and your SunClan have this entire forest of prey to eat," he went on. Minnowpaw could tell he was trying not to sound desperate, even though he was. "What's *one* vole?"

Just then Minnowpaw detected a faint scuttling from the tall grass she'd been in earlier. Acting on hunter instincts, she darted into the grass, and returned with another vole and a made-up mind.

He's right, we do have prey to spare. How could I let them starve?

She dropped her own vole beside the blue-gray tom's and looked up at him. "What's two?"

A tension in his shoulders relaxed, a tension she hadn't noticed before. "I won't forget your kindness," he mewed quietly.

Minnowpaw shrugged, feeling slightly sheepish. "Yeah, well, you got lucky with me. I don't think my Clanmates would've been so lenient." She thought of Thumpstep and his unnecessary attachment to the warrior code.

"Your friends a little uptight?" the tom asked.

Minnowpaw rolled her eyes. "You don't know the half of it."

His whiskers twitched with amusement. "Well, I'm glad you're above that. Thank you, on behalf of all my companions."

"Just be careful if you decide to hunt here again," Minnowpaw warned. "Like I said, you won't get off so easy."

"I'll remember that."

As he moved to collect the two voles, Minnowpaw meowed, "Wait. Tell me your name."

"It's Dominic," the tom replied. "But you can just call me Dom. If we ever see each other again, that is. What's yours?"

"Minnowpaw."

Dom squinted. "Strange. Why not just Minnow?"

"It's a Clan custom. Maybe I'll explain it all to you. If we ever see each other again, that is."

Dom's eyes sparkled a little. "I don't know why, Minnowpaw, but something tells me we will."

* * *

Several days later, Minnowpaw was lounging with Shadowpaw by the apprentice den. She'd managed to lie her way out of trouble after sneaking out, telling Thumpstep she'd simply taken her time on the elders' ticks. But since that day, she'd found Dominic occupying her thoughts more than once.

She hoped he was doing okay, that those two voles had made a difference for him and his campmates. It had even crossed her mind that she could bring them more prey from time to time. She'd be helping cats in need—albeit by breaking the warrior code, but that thing was stupid anyways—and she'd get to visit Dom, too. It was strange to her that she'd only met him once and already missed his company. But he'd made an impression on her: he was friendly to her, never hostile, and he clearly cared about his campmates. He

was a good cat.

Hmph. I bet my Clanmates would call me bee-brained for thinking a cat outside the Clans is good. If Shadowpaw wasn't right beside her, Minnowpaw would have scoffed in disdain. *They're so small-minded!*

A loud noise cut into her thoughts. Powerful rustles, coming from the fern tunnel. Almost every cat in the clearing looked up, including Minnowpaw and her brother.

"That must be a returning patrol," Shadowpaw mewed worriedly. "Maybe they found something bad."

Minnowpaw's first thought was of Dominic. Did he try hunting in the forest again and got caught by a patrol? Or had it been one of his friends? Were they all okay?

She watched as Quickstorm sprinted into the clearing with Hazelfrost and Forestfire right behind him. The three warriors didn't look injured, only distressed.

"Adderstar!" Quickstorm yowled. "You need to hear this."

Adderstar stalked out of his den under the Cliffrock and stood before the patrol. "What's going on?"

Minnowpaw listened with a pounding heart as Forestfire described what she'd found: the scent of rogues at the edge of the Twolegplace. Rogues who been trespassing for a while now. *Dominic, and his hungry campmates. This isn't good for them at all,* Minnowpaw thought, feeling more anxious for those strangers than she expected.

Hazelfrost's pelt bristled with aggression. "Clearly they've gotten away with this for too long!" she hissed. "We must chase them out. They are a threat to SunClan until we do!"

Several cats caterwauled their agreement. Minnowpaw forced herself to add her voice to the lot, afraid her loyalty would be questioned if her Clanmates thought she wanted to leave the rogues alone—which she did.

The rest of the discussion was a blur. Eventually Adderstar dismissed the Clan, and the noise in the clearing dissolved into muttering, both hostile and fearful. Forestfire left the camp again, with some new cats in tow. Probably going back to the Twolegplace border to look for rogues.

They don't want to harm us. They're just starving! She wished there was a way she could tell everyone that without them wondering how she knew. But even if they did know, would that stop them from attacking the rogues? Probably not. Her Clanmates seemed to care about SunClan and nothing more.

Minnowpaw decided she would never be like that. Even now that SunClan were aware of the rogues' presence, she would not turn a blind eye to their struggles. But still, she wondered if it was possible to be loyal to two different groups of cats at the same time.

Chapter 2

The day of the first battle between SunClan and the rogues...

Minnowpaw was curled up in the tiny space between the apprentice den and the camp wall, simmering with jealousy and hoping no one would find her and ask her what was wrong.

Not long ago Minnowpaw and Shadowpaw had returned from another tree-hunting session; Thumpstep and Cherryfur had wanted to see how much they'd improved from the last time. Minnowpaw had been trying her hardest, and considering the practice she'd been doing, she'd thought she was performing very well and had been pleased with herself.

Obviously she couldn't have been more wrong.

Shadowpaw had done spectacularly. So spectacularly that, right now, out in the clearing, Cherryfur was raving to Duskheart and Shinefur about how well her apprentice was doing in training, and how he was a such a fast learner, and how he might even be a better hunter than her one day, and Minnowpaw almost wanted to kill her. Because then there was Thumpstep, who scowled at her and gave her instructions and tips like she didn't already know what she was doing, and was never satisfied with her no matter how hard she tried. She could give him the stars themselves, and he would only grunt that she could have given him brighter ones.

But, of course, that was nothing new to her.

What *really* fed Minnowpaw's currently murderous temper was that Shinefur and Duskheart seemed to have forgotten they had a daughter. From the moment Cherryfur opened her mouth, Shadowpaw was all any of them cared about. No one asked about her training, or told her she was doing well, or even looked in her direction. No one noticed when she'd abruptly stormed off and hidden herself behind the apprentice den.

Minnowpaw tried to do her best not to think about it, but it was all that was on her mind. Shadowpaw was being illuminated, and she was crouching in darkness waiting for someone to notice her. But they never did. She wasn't good enough to be noticed by anyone.

And then Minnowpaw thought of Dominic.

* * *

"So there are three other Clans? With just as many cats as SunClan?" Dominic looked daunted, as if he was at a Gathering and all the Clans were around him. Minnowpaw found it very amusing.

"Uh huh," she mewed.

"What were their names again?"

"MoonClan, WaterClan, and FireClan." Minnowpaw rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Dom, they're not hard to remember."

"For you, maybe!" Dom retorted. "I'm no Clan cat."

"You're still a cat. Being outside the Clans doesn't make your brain smaller." Minnowpaw's whiskers twitched teasingly. "Or maybe it does."

"Shush!" Dom huffed, cuffing her ear playfully. "Okay. Four Clans. And you said they're bound by a bunch of rules?"

"Yes," Minnowpaw replied. "The warrior code."

"Sounds strict." Dom squinted. "How many rules, exactly?"

Minnowpaw scoffed. "In my opinion, too many. In theirs, not enough."

Dom chuckled. "That bad, huh?"

"Well, some of the rules are good," Minnowpaw meowed. "They protect cats. For example, one code is that we can't refuse to help a kit that's in danger or pain. We have to at least try to help."

"That does sound good," Dom agreed. "What's your least favorite rule?"

Minnowpaw answered instantly, "That we have to thank StarClan for

every piece of fresh-kill we catch."

"StarClan?" Dom echoed. "I thought you said there were only four Clans!"

"There are. But StarClan are our ancestors," Minnowpaw explained. "Basically ghosts that live in the stars, that are *the stars. And part of the warrior code is to respect them by thanking them every time you catch prey."*

"Every time?" Dom meowed. "That seems like overkill."

"Right?" Minnowpaw snorted. She sensed the familiar anger rising up again. "It's so dumb. I get that we should respect StarClan, because they're so powerful and all, but he thinks fresh-kill is cursed or something if you don't praise them for every—"

"Who's 'he?'" Dominic asked curiously.

Minnowpaw blinked. "I said 'he?'"

"Yeah."

"Oh." Minnowpaw slumped a little, feeling futile just thinking of him. "Thumpstep. He's my mentor, since I'm an apprentice training to be a warrior."

Dom studied her for a moment. "You don't seem to like him very much," he said.

"Well, it's mutual," Minnowpaw snapped. "Because I can see every single day that he wishes my brother Shadowpaw was his apprentice and not me. No matter how hard I train or how obedient I am, it's never enough for him. I'm inferior and everyone likes Shadowpaw better, and he's going to be a better warrior than me." She stared at her claws, which glinted angrily as they dug into the earth, stopping her from slashing viciously at the white Twoleg fence like she wanted to.

"You're not inferior," Dominic told her softly.

Something in his voice made Minnowpaw look up. Dom's eyes were so golden in the sunlight, like Thumpstep's but infinitely kinder. She couldn't

look away even if she wanted to.

"Thumpstep makes you feel like you are," he went on, "but you aren't. I know so. Unlike him and all your other Clanmates, you had the grace to help us instead of mindlessly driving us out. And I think that makes you better than them all."

* * *

Remembering that recent day, when she and Dominic had hidden away in a Twoleg garden to talk, Minnowpaw was already feeling better. There was something so calming about Dom's friendly presence that just thinking about him brightened her days. She wished she could talk to him right now, take her mind off her fury and jealousy by telling him more about the Clans, or hunting to help feed his campmates.

Does he miss me, too? she wondered. She hoped he did, that it wouldn't be strange to him that she wished he was her Clanmate. That way she wouldn't be risking herself every time she visited him.

But even if it was possible for him to live in SunClan, Minnowpaw knew Dominic would hate it here. He'd told her enough about life in the Twolegplace for her to know how different it was from Clan life.

Dom's campmates had no rivals, no one to tell them where they could and couldn't hunt (besides SunClan). They only had a few rules that were actually enforced, and their leader wasn't really a leader—simply a cat that kept everything in order. She let her cats do just about whatever they pleased, and never claimed her word was law. And even then, her cats, Dom included, still respected her as much as a warrior would respect their Clan leader.

Their lives sounded great to Minnowpaw. And aside from having to live among Twolegs, and the starvation part, she envied them a little. They had freedom. Here in SunClan, she was never free.

Minnowpaw's musing was interrupted by a sudden furor out in the clearing. Startled and curious, she slid out from her hiding place and craned her neck to see over the crowd of cats that had quickly

assembled. In the center of them all stood Dawnpaw, medicine cat apprentice to Grayleaf. Her amber eyes were wide with distress.

"...how many there were," she was panting. "Rosepaw said to get help before we could figure it out. She's all alone, and they're on our territory! We need to get there as soon as we can!"

Adderstar padded up to Dawnpaw. "Don't worry," he growled. "They'll be back in the Twolegplace as quickly as they left it."

The Twolegplace...Rosepaw and Dawnpaw found the rogues on our land again! Minnowpaw's claws sunk anxiously into the ground. *And they won't get away unharmed this time. Oh, this is bad. What if Dominic is there? What if someone gets killed?*

While she was debating what she should do, Thumpstep padded up to Adderstar. "I'd like to be in the patrol," he meowed. "And I want Minnowpaw with me."

Thumpstep's eyes raked over his apprentice, who stared at him in surprise.

"Good," Adderstar responded. "Just watch her back. We don't know how these rogues like to fight."

"I won't let her out of my sight," Thumpstep said with a brisk nod.

Minnowpaw bristled slightly. *I'm almost a warrior! I don't need anyone to watch my back.*

She sheathed her claws and forced her fur flat as Thumpstep approached her. "Did you catch all that?" he asked. When she nodded, he went on, "I've decided that, if there *is* a battle, this will be your warrior assessment. I'll be watching your moves as carefully as I can."

As excited as she was at the prospect of being a warrior at last, Minnowpaw's heart sank. She didn't *want* to hurt any of those cats. But now it seemed she was being forced to.

Keeping her voice hard as she knew her mentor wanted it, she asked, "What about Shadowpaw? Is he coming too?"

"No. And Cherryfur has already cleared him to become a warrior," Thumpstep added, narrowing his eyes pointedly.

Another reason I can't fail at this, Minnowpaw told herself. *There's no way I'll let my brother get ahead of me. I have to show SunClan I'm worthy of being respected, too!* As much as she regretted having to fight Dom's friends, she felt this was something she had to do for herself. When she was a warrior, cats would take her more seriously and stop ignoring her like fresh-kill left in the rain. And, almost better than that, she would have more freedom to visit Dom.

Taking a silent, deep breath, she told Thumpstep, "I'm ready. I won't fail you or the Clan."

Thumpstep spoke with cold approval. "That's what I want to hear."

* * *

It was sunhigh on the day after SunClan's first victory against the rogues. The newly named Minnowtail sat a few fox-lengths away from Adderstar as she watched her brother receive his own warrior name.

Most new warriors would feel proud or elated, she thought. But all she could feel was relief. Relief that Dominic hadn't been there, relief that no cats on either side of the fight had been killed—although Rosepaw certainly came close—and relief that Thumpstep hadn't seen through her ruse of "attacking" the rogues. On the way to the battle, Minnowtail had resolved that she didn't have to *hurt* anyone, just do enough to get them off SunClan territory.

She recalled one part of the battle where she'd had to chase a bluish-gray tom back to the Twolegplace. "Go help Cherryfur! I'll deal with this cat!" she'd said to Rosepaw. And as soon as the tortoiseshell apprentice had dashed off, Minnowtail had roughly pulled the tom to his paws, turning so her Clanmates couldn't see her face.

* * *

The blue-gray tom snarled at Minnowpaw and slashed at her with his

claws fully extended. Minnowpaw skillfully dodged each attack.

"I don't want to hurt you!" she hissed to him, batting his face with force but keeping her claws sheathed. "They do, but I don't. I promise!"

The rogue stared at her, visibly startled, before continuing to rain blows down—with his claws sheathed this time. Relieved, Minnowpaw continued dodging and pretending to fight back, praying they looked convincing.

"I think I know you," the rogue growled. "Dom's friend that lives with the forest cats. He's talked about you. Says you're different than the rest of 'em. Kinder, considerate."

"That's me," Minnowpaw replied, happy he had a reason to believe her. "I'm sorry about this, really. But they want to chase you off, and I have to pretend I do, too."

"I know," the rogue said. "I'll play along. And thank you," he added. "For having the backs of total strangers."

"You don't deserve the treatment my Clan is giving you," Minnowpaw murmured. "You're only hungry."

"Things will change," the rogue said gruffly. "Now chase me off, before your 'Clan' gets suspicious."

So Minnowpaw did, running after the tom until he vanished into the undergrowth. "And stay out!" she snarled, loud enough for a nearby Thumpstep to hear. With that, she whirled around to face the remainder of the fight.

* * *

Minnowtail wondered if Dominic knew by now what she'd done. She hoped she would get a chance to talk to him soon, and find out how his campmates were doing after the battle.

Dragging herself back into the present, she raised her chin as SunClan began to chant her and her brother's new names. They all looked so proud of the Clan's freshest warriors. *But most of it is probably directed at Shadowpool,* she thought bitterly.

Minnowtail allowed herself, for a moment, to imagine that her Clan really was this proud of her. It felt so wonderful to know so many cats loved her and wanted her around. It almost made her forget what the word *lonely* meant. Almost. Perhaps if it wasn't a daydream, she really would have forgotten.

She cast a glance at the sky above the Cliffrock, a desperate desire threatening to overwhelm her. Silverpelt was invisible in the daylight, but surely StarClan could still hear her. *Please let this be the day everything changes,* she prayed. *I'm so, so tired of being so, so alone.*

Chapter 3

After Rosepaw and Pineclaw fight the tabby rogue...

The only sound in the nighttime forest was the tentative *crunch* of countless leaves beneath one set of paws. That, and Minnowtail's heart, which beat quicker than normal with anxiety. All she could think about was where she was placing her paws in the darkness—it didn't matter that she was alone, falling on her face would still be embarrassing—and whether Dominic would even be happy to see her tonight. Whether he would even show up.

Earlier, when the sun was still up, Pineclaw and Rosepaw had returned from a training session injured, because a rogue had shown up in the forest. Their wounds had been minor, but Minnowtail could see from the shaken look in Rosepaw's eyes that it could have been much more serious.

Pineclaw had assured the Clan that the rogue—who'd been present at the battle, too—didn't leave without wounds of his own, much worse. That was partly what made worry gnaw at Minnowtail's insides; she really hoped the rogue had survived, and would recover well.

But mostly what ate at her was how Dom would feel. She'd only known him for about two moons—and their clandestine meetings were sparse at that—and already she feared losing him as her friend. He was the only cat that understood her, made her feel comfortable and happy. Not Shadowpool, not Duskheart or Shinefur, not Thumpstep, no one in SunClan. Only Dominic.

Minnowtail prayed that these constant incidents wouldn't make him hate her. She wished her Clanmates would just stop and *think* for a moment, ask why the Twolegplace cats were hunting in the forest, instead of blindly following that stupid warrior code and chasing them out like the cruel, selfish little—

"Minnowtail!"

Before her sudden burst of fury could overcome her, Minnowtail heard a wonderfully familiar voice call her name. Emerging from behind a tree was Dominic, his dark fur nearly invisible, but golden eyes glowing as always.

"We haven't met since you asked me if I'd seen those missing SunClan kits," Dom mewed. "It's good to see you." His voice was soft, as if he didn't want to disturb the peaceful night, and he sounded his usual friendly self. Minnowtail's relief rendered her speechless for a moment.

"Min? Are you okay?" Dom watched her with slight concern.

For some reason the nickname was what broke Minnowtail out of her trancelike state. *Min.* Dom had resolved to call her that more often when she told him her new warrior name. A pointless mouthful, he'd called it—and she'd laughed in agreement. She liked Min much better, though she was also glad her Clanmates never called her that. It was a private name, like an inside joke that only she and Dom understood. A symbol of the intimacy Minnowtail shared with him that she had with no one else.

"Y-yeah. I'm good." Minnowtail blinked. "I'm really happy to see you. I snuck out of camp to find you, and...here you are."

"Funny. I was sort of looking for you too. While trying to find some prey."

"You catch anything yet?" Minnowtail asked.

Dom shook his head. "But I haven't been looking for long, either."

"I can help you hunt," Minnowtail offered.

"Maybe later. Right now I just want to catch up." Dom turned and scrambled up the tree he stood beside. His climbing was less graceful than that of SunClan cats, but it did the job; he pulled himself onto a low branch and looked down at Minnowtail. "Come on," he beckoned, waving his tail.

As Minnowtail joined him in the tree, she meowed curiously, "Do the Twolegplace cats hunt better at night?"

"It's about the same," Dom answered. "Well, minus all the SunClan cats trying to kill us."

Minnowtail winced, and immediately Dom looked guilty. "That was rash. I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright. You're not wrong," Minnowtail sighed. "Speaking of, two of my Clanmates attacked one of your own. Big, dark tabby tom. How is he doing?"

Dom's eyes narrowed. "Theo," he said. "He'll have scars, but he'll live. Not very different from the rest of us."

Minnowtail scored her claws through the bark of the branch, leaving deep marks that reflected her pain and rage. "*I hate it!*" she snarled. "I hate that you're starving and have to go through this, I hate my fox-hearted Clan for not even taking a *moment* to notice, I hate that they shun you just for not being Clan cats, I—"

Breaking off, she realized her voice was rising to a shout, and any of her Clanmates that were still awake could've heard her. So instead she let her claws slide out and pierce the branch again, letting out a long hiss as she did so. She wished the wood was prey, that she could tear it apart and watch blood spatter the grass, anything to get rid of this *seething* feeling.

"Easy," Dominic whispered. His voice wasn't fearful, only gentle. "Easy, Min. It's alright."

Just hearing the nickname helped a lot. Feeling as if she was rapidly deflating, Minnowtail sighed and leaned against Dominic. He seemed a little startled, but didn't try to pull away.

"It *isn't* alright," she rasped. "I care about you and the other Twolegplace cats so much, but I'm part of the very Clan that wants them to starve. They don't *care*, Dom. About me, or you, or anything outside this forest. They'll never see reason. There's nothing we can do to fix this."

"Maybe there isn't right now," Dom murmured. "But a time will come soon. Things will get better for us, you included. We have to

believe that, or we'll lose any chance of making it through." Darkly he added, "Zodiac thinks our only chance is to drive SunClan out of the forest and live here ourselves."

"Zodiac doesn't know much about the Clans," Minnowtail responded. "Even if it was possible to drive SunClan out, you wouldn't be here for long. The other Clans would find out, and then you'd be the targets of *three* Clans, not just one, until SunClan came back to the forest. So good luck with *that* plan."

Dom chuckled, but there wasn't any humor to it. "Scratch that, then. I'll let Zodiac know."

Minnowtail looked into Dom's eyes, less than a mouse-length from her own. "I feel so powerless. If there's any way I can help you, I'll do it. You're the only cats that matter to me now. SunClan is awful; I can't bring myself to be loyal to those cats anymore. Not even my parents and Shadowpool."

"So why do you stay?"

It was such a simple question, but it hit Minnowtail like a blow right to the face. Why *did* she stay in SunClan? Her Clanmates ignored her or just didn't like her; her parents only loved her brother. Dominic cared about her more than all of them combined. And life outside the Clans, even if food was scarce, sounded infinitely better than her life now. She didn't even have the same beliefs as them. What reason did she have to put up with them anymore?

"I don't know," she meowed quietly. "When I was still an apprentice, I felt tied to them because I thought my life would change once I was a warrior. Just work hard and follow the dumb rules, and everyone will love you eventually. But now I *am* a warrior, and everything is the same. It didn't make them like me any more, much less love me. I was naïve to think things would get better."

"Nothing will, not while you're still in SunClan." Dom leaned even closer, his eyes like two suns, imploring her to listen. "Come live with us, with me. Zodiac and the others already know about you; I tell them about you and how you're the only forest cat that cares

about us. You'd be welcome there. And you wouldn't have to keep that weird warrior name."

That made Minnowtail laugh a little. "I could call myself whatever I want to be called," she said softly.

"That's right," Dom mewed. "No part of you has to be dictated by someone else. Your name, your behavior, who you're allowed to be friends with...nothing. You'll be free, and it won't be long before my campmates come to love you just like you wanted the Clan to."

The path to all Minnowtail ever wanted was right beside her. So she surprised herself when she said, "I want to go with you, I really do, but...I also can't just *leave*. I mean, I may not be attached to the Clan, but I still grew up here. That camp, this forest...it's all I've ever known. I can't abandon it in the blink of an eye. Give me some time to think."

"Of course," Dom replied. He didn't sound upset or offended, which relieved Minnowtail. "I'd say the same if you were asking me to join SunClan."

"No, you wouldn't. You would flat-out refuse if you knew what was good for you."

"Well, you're good for me."

"Am I, now?" Minnowtail's tone was wry.

"Yeah. Honestly." Dom was joking and serious simultaneously. "You're the only reason I can think that not every cat outside my campmates is a piece of rat dung. You help me hunt. And just talking to you makes me feel less on edge all the time."

"You're good for me, too," Minnowtail said warmly. "Sometimes I wonder who I would be if I hadn't snuck out as an apprentice, and found you. You've shown me a whole other side of the cats SunClan thinks of as their enemies. Without you, maybe—" The words on her tongue tasted like mouse bile. "Maybe I would have been just like them."

"I don't believe that," Dom replied. "I'm not the reason you're a good

cat. You were better than your Clanmates before you even met me. I know because you could have tried to chase me back into the neighborhood, but instead you stopped and figured out why I was even in the forest. You knew instinctively that we weren't really the enemy."

"When I said you were starving," Minnowtail whispered, "you tensed and said, 'We're managing.' I didn't believe you for a second. That was when I knew I couldn't just drive you away." She allowed herself to feel a tinge of pride in herself. "I suppose you're right."

"When am I not?"

"I'm not sure. How many Clans are there around here?"

Dominic appeared startled. He was silent for a moment, then meowed uncertainly, "Five?"

Minnowtail twitched her ears smugly. "Consider that a time you weren't right."

* * *

The moon was beginning to dip in the sky, signaling that Minnowtail had better go. She'd stayed longer than she had planned to, losing track of time as she and Dominic drifted between hunting and striking up conversations. She wasn't even tired; spending time with Dom gave her energy in a way sleeping never could. She would have stayed out in the forest with him until the sun was up, if dawn patrols weren't a thing in the Clans. She had to get back before someone woke up and realized she was missing—if they hadn't already.

"I'll miss you right up until I see you again," Dom told her.

His fond and wistful tone touched Minnowtail's heart. No one else spoke to her like that. Impulsively she pressed her flank to his, and their tails intertwined. "So will I," she murmured.

"I'll be watching the edge of the forest for you. And you can come to the neighborhood whenever you like, visit the shelter. Our cats wander all over the area; you can just tell them your name and I bet

they'll recognize it. If not, just say you're a friend of mine. They'll bring you to the shelter."

"I think I'll take you up on that," Minnowtail mewed.

Dom licked her ear. "I hope you do. And...well, you know I hope you'll come stay with us."

Minnowtail opened her mouth to respond and found that no words would come. She didn't know what to say. But after several heartbeats, she said mechanically, "I should get going now."

"Of course. Safe travels." Slowly Dom pulled away, the gold in his gaze dulled by regret. "See you soon?"

Minnowtail blinked softly at him. "Definitely." And with that she turned and vanished into shadows and undergrowth.

She was slightly startled to find every hair on her pelt yowling at her to go back, to let Dom lead her to the Twolegplace and the shelter, and never call herself a SunClan warrior again. It was all she could do not to give in to the urge, the instinct.

Why am I even trying to resist it? she wondered. *SunClan sucks. I have nothing tying me to them and tons of things tying me to the Twolegplace cats. Why do I bother going back?*

And she knew the answer instantly: no matter how much she hated being in SunClan, there was still a part of her hoping she could finally call that camp her home, and truly mean it.

Chapter 4

The day after Rosethorn and Nightshade's warrior ceremonies...

The SunClan camp was in the doldrums this morning. It was good to have two new warriors, but still tragic that, in the process of making them, another had been lost. Every cat, even Rainfoot's little kits, was mourning the death of Pineclaw.

Except Minnowtail. But she wasn't *glad* Pineclaw was dead, either. All she could bring herself to feel right now was worry and an intense curiosity.

She was desperate to know what exactly had gone down between Thrushtail, Pineclaw, and the two rogues, one of which was dead now. But Thrushtail couldn't bring himself to talk about the incident, no matter who questioned him. Minnowtail could understand that, but it didn't stop her from feeling so frustrated. She had so many questions. Who started the fight? Did the other cat survive after they fled the scene? And—perhaps the worst question of all—had Dominic been there? Was he the rogue that was killed? The thought of that made Minnowtail sick to her stomach.

She could have asked the newly named Rosethorn or Nightshade about what they saw to find out. But asking them to give an exact description of the rogues would be too suspicious. Plus, the two warriors were almost as mute as Thrushtail. Rosethorn especially, since Pineclaw had been her mentor, and they'd obviously cared about each other very much. The only way for Minnowtail to imagine how much the tortoiseshell she-cat was suffering was to imagine watching Dom bleed out right before her eyes.

And Nightshade, well...Minnowtail simply didn't want to speak to him. She was still hurting after what he'd done several days ago, right before SunClan's Gathering patrol—which she and Nightshade had been on—departed.

* * *

While the rest of the Gathering patrol chattered eagerly, Minnowtail sat quietly off to the side. She didn't feel like talking to anyone or throwing up her confident, energetic persona right now. All she could think of were two juxtaposing questions: Why haven't I left yet? *and* How could I leave?

It was more than enough to sap her energy. She wasn't even sure why she hadn't backed out of going to the Gathering tonight. Perhaps she was subconsciously trying to prove herself wrong, prove that SunClan did care about her and that she was as much a warrior as her Clanmates.

Minnowtail sighed. Being at war with myself is exhausting.

It was then that Nightpaw strode up to her with seemingly no regard for her gloomy demeanor. He sat right beside her, eyes like two frozen lakes trained on her cheerfully.

"Hello!" he mewed. His voice was unusually loud. "Are you okay? You looked a little down."

Minnowtail stared at him for a moment, caught off guard. Someone was actually starting a conversation with her ?

"Er...I'm good," she managed. "Just bored. I can't wait for the Gathering."

"Me too!" Nightpaw groaned. "Everyone is ready to go, so why can't we? There's no harm in being early to a Gathering."

"Exactly!" Minnowtail exclaimed. "At this rate, we'll just be late instead."

Nightpaw let out a mrrow *of laughter. Minnowtail tried not to stare at him incredulously. Cats greeted her casually and gave her orders, but she couldn't remember the last time a cat really spoke to her, unless she started the conversation—and even then, the talk never lasted long. But here was Nightpaw, treating her exactly how she'd wished her Clanmates would treat her for so long.*

It was one cat, one time, but more than enough for Minnowtail to open up like a blooming flower. After all, this was one of the only things she'd wanted for so long now.

"So, do you have any friends from other Clans?" she mewed, asking the first question she could think of. "Anyone you want to see at the Gathering?"

"Well, I know some apprentices from WaterClan and MoonClan—I could've been friends with some FireClan cats too," Nightpaw huffed, "if the whole thing with Rainfoot's kits hadn't happened! Anyway, I'm not really friends with any of them."

"Same here," Minnowtail replied. "I've got no friends outside SunClan." Immediately she thought of Dominic and felt guilty for saying that. But Nightpaw could never know that she was friends with a rogue. No SunClan cat could know.

Nightpaw blinked, nudging her with his shoulder. "In that case, why don't we stick together at the Gathering? You know, keep each other company while we wait for Adderstar and Amberstar to start yelling at each other."

Minnowtail debated pricking herself with a claw to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Why was Nightpaw suddenly being so friendly to her? They hadn't even talked much since she became a warrior. But who was she to refuse his friendship?

Just as she opened her mouth to say she would spend the Gathering with him, she noticed Nightpaw wasn't looking at her anymore. His eyes had turned from bright and cheerful to dark and bitter. Following his gaze, Minnowtail found herself looking at Rosepaw. The patched she-cat lay outside the apprentice den with a pigeon she did not look inclined to eat. She looked more downcast than Minnowtail had felt earlier, and Minnowtail wondered why.

Then Rosepaw looked up, seemingly at Nightpaw. Nightpaw quickly looked away and gave Minnowtail another cheery look. "So, do you want to hang out with me at the Gathering?" he prompted.

His voice was oddly loud again. Rosepaw's ears pricked—clearly she'd heard him—and she thrust her head down again, looking as if she wanted nothing more than to disappear. And it began to click for Minnowtail.

She'd noticed a few days ago that Nightpaw and Rosepaw had stopped speaking to each other. Clearly they must have had a fallout over something, though she couldn't guess what. And to her, it was also clear that they both desperately wanted to make up, but their pride was getting in the way. Rosepaw just sulked for most of her days, trying to ignore Nightpaw. But Nightpaw himself...

Was he only being friendly to Minnowtail to make Rosepaw jealous?

That's a dumb question*, she thought, suddenly brimming with offense. Of course that's what Nightpaw was doing. She was mouse-brained to think anyone in this awful Clan really wanted to be friends with her. The only times she ever existed to them was when they needed something from her. And she always gave it to them, desperate to please them and prove her worth.*

But it never worked. And Minnowtail was sick and tired of trying.

"Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass," she hissed at him, so only he could hear, pouring as much fury as she could into her tone. "But I'm sure you can find some other cat willing to fake being your friend so you can make your precious Rosepaw jealous."

Nightpaw flinched, eyes widening a little. Seemingly on instinct, he glanced at Rosepaw, who still stared at her paws blankly. Guiltily he averted his eyes, mumbling, "That's not—"

"Don't even try to deny it," Minnowtail snapped. She wished they were somewhere more private, so she could tackle him and slash his ears for having the nerve to trick her like this. "It's completely obvious, anyway. You're an awful liar."

She wanted to continue, to lay into Nightpaw about how rude and selfish he was being, but Adderstar was calling the Gathering patrol to leave.

Minnowtail sighed, glaring at Nightpaw. "Look, if you're having problems with Rosepaw," she told him, "then that's you guys' problem. Not mine. So don't go dragging me into your little fight because you don't want to do all the dirty work. You want to be friends with her again? Solve those problems yourself. Don't use me to make it easier on you."

She left Nightpaw staring after her as she let herself get lost in the midst of the departing Gathering patrol. She hoped he only saw how irritated she was, and not how much his actions really hurt her.

* * *

That had been the last straw for Minnowtail. Her final sign that she didn't belong in SunClan, her proof that she never would.

At that Gathering she'd told herself over and over that she wouldn't stay in this camp another day. She would go to her den and wait until everyone fell asleep again, then slip out and spend the night in some Twoleg garden. Find Dominic in the morning, tell him she was ready to live with him and the rogues.

And she could've done it; there was nothing stopping her, not physically. But mentally, something had made her stay, despite all her resolve. And this time, it wasn't a tiny voice mewling, *Maybe this time they'll see your worth!* that stopped her. In fact, she wasn't quite sure *what* it was, but it was a strong gut feeling.

So here she was, still residing in this place she despised so much, barely caring that one of her Clanmates was dead.

Dominic must know what happened, she thought. *One rogue survived. They would have come back and told the rest of their campmates. I just need to go find Dom.*

Minnowtail could also tell him she was ready to abandon SunClan, but...in truth, she still wasn't, even after having so many days to think it over. The gut feeling hadn't gone away. She still had a reason to stay in SunClan. She just didn't know what that reason was.

* * *

"Dom? Are you there?"

It was about the fifth time Minnowtail had called out for him. She had searched all along the Twolegplace border, hoping to find him hunting. He was nowhere to be found. She hoped it was only because he didn't want to be caught by patrolling SunClan warriors,

and not because he didn't want to see her.

Gritting her teeth with frustration and worry, Minnowtail finally leapt over a section of the white Twoleg fence and into a garden. She weaved her way through strong-smelling bushes and soft, trimmed grass until she'd passed through the entire yard. Before her was a narrow stretch of some kind of smooth white rock—a sidewalk, she remembered Dom calling it. Beyond that was a small Thunderpath, the rogue word for that being a road. That was the thing monsters, or cars, travelled along, carrying Twolegs inside of them.

This was the furthest Minnowtail had ever been into the Twolegplace. As many times as she imagined herself living here with the rogues, the idea of delving into this unfamiliar territory was unappealing. She'd at least thought Dom would be here to guide her.

As a last resort, she huffed, "Dom, I'm not saying I *wouldn't* get run over by a car for you, but could you please not make me risk it today?"

"Good to know your sarcasm hasn't gone anywhere."

As Dominic emerged around the corner of the Twoleg den the yard belonged to, Minnowtail gasped. Not out of surprise or relief or joy, but out of plain horror. Now she understood why, when he'd spoken, his tone had been utterly flat.

His once-bright golden eyes were now as dull as rainclouds. Gone from them was any trace of that friendliness and lighthearted humor she'd come to know. His blue-gray pelt was matted, like he hadn't groomed himself in days, and it practically hung from his bones. And, most alarmingly, he looked hungrier than he had the first time she'd ever seen him. Minnowtail's stomach flipped.

"Dominic!" she cried, racing towards him and almost crashing into him. "What...what *happened* to you?"

Dominic sat down heavily, as if standing was an effort. "Been giving away my food to my campmates."

Minnowtail's heart sank. "Dominic, you have to eat just as much as the rest of them do. You can't let yourself starve! They need you to keep hunting for them!"

"It's not what you think," Dom sighed. "I'd eat something if I could. But ever since...ever since Val was killed, I just can't keep anything down. It all makes me sick."

Val. Minnowtail thought of the rogue that died in the forest, one of the ones that had attacked Thrushtail and Pineclaw.

"You know about all that, right?" rasped Dominic. "You must, since Bat killed one of your campmates, too, before he came back. What's that saying?" he added so bitterly that Minnowtail almost flinched. "'An eye for an eye?'"

"Oh, Dom..." Minnowtail buried her face in his neck. He neither pulled away nor leaned into her. "I'm so, so sorry. None of that *ever* should have happened."

"The Clan cats attacked them first," said Dom numbly. "Bat and Valery were only hunting, not trying to cause any kind of trouble. And those filthy, selfish *fox-hearts* took a cheap shot. Val barely had time to defend herself before..."

Suddenly he slid to the ground completely, his words trailing off into a sob. Minnowtail was down with him in an instant. She pressed her flank to his, touched her nose to his ear, anything that might help to shelter him from these waves of grief crashing over him relentlessly.

"I...I'm so sorry," she whispered again. "Pineclaw and Thrushtail, they had no right to attack them. And Bat had every right to kill Pineclaw for it."

"Tell me, Minnowtail." Dom moved away a little to stare into her eyes. Minnowtail could feel his whiskers touching hers.

"Tell you what?"

"Whose side you're really on."

Minnowtail blinked, her mouth dropping open. "What are you saying? You know I'm with you and your campmates, always."

"Are you, really?" Dominic backed away from her angrily. "Because I think that, if you were, we wouldn't have to search for each other the way we always do. You would live here with me, with all my campmates. And you would understand how I feel right now. You didn't care about Pineclaw, so his death didn't bother you. But Val was one of my best friends, and she's dead now. And even though it was *your* Clanmates that killed her, even though you always say they don't care about you, you still stay with them.

"Why is that?" he hissed. "Why do you keep playing this little game of back and forth? Is it all a lie? Have you been on their side all along? Are you only using me, pretending to care so you can murder me when my back is turned, like they murdered Val?"

"Dom, *stop*." Minnowtail stared at him, wide-eyed and trembling. Her voice shook, too. "That is not fair and you know it. I know I'm not always there, and honestly, I know I should be. But I'm there whenever I can be. You know that! Every chance I get, I come find you here and I help you make sure you and your campmates don't have to starve. I risk Adderstar having me killed for treason every time I do that!"

The idea that Dominic, the one cat she fully trusted, couldn't even bring himself to trust her, threatened to break Minnowtail's heart into countless pieces. Slowly she turned away from him, unable to face him anymore.

"I'm sorry I haven't done everything you wanted me to," she croaked. "But I trust you with my life, and I've done enough to prove over and over that you can trust me, too. And the fact that you still don't...it really hurts, Dom."

Do I really mess up that badly every time? she asked herself miserably. *Am I really so horrible that no one thinks they can trust me?*

There was an unexpected rustling of grass. Minnowtail realized Dominic was approaching her. She closed her eyes, bracing herself for whatever he was about to say or do.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I shouldn't have said any of that. I didn't mean it. It's just...my grief is clouding my judgement. I trust you with my life, too; I never want you to question that. I know the position you're in is hard enough as it is. Me patronizing you for it definitely doesn't help."

Minnowtail exhaled softly. The last thing she'd expected was for him to apologize. *But I can tell he means it.*

"Don't say that," she responded. "Like you said, you didn't mean to be patronizing. That's your grief talking, not you."

"But I still said it and made you feel that way. I'm sorry, Min."

Minnowtail turned back around to face Dominic, blinking slowly. "It's alright," she meowed. "I forgive you. I know you're grieving, and grief can make us cruel. But I also know the real Dominic is the furthest thing from cruel."

Dom sighed, the tension in his body dissipating. He leaned forward, placing his head over Minnowtail's, and she gladly leaned in too.

"Thank you," whispered Dom. "If the things I said had made you abandon me completely, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

"I will *never* abandon you," Minnowtail said fiercely. In a softer tone she added, "You're the best thing that's ever been in my life."

"Right back at you."

Their tails intertwined, and they stayed like that for what could have been a few moments or a few moons. Minnowtail wouldn't have minded either way.

The peaceful silence was broken by Dom. "I hate to bring this up all over again," he mewed, "but I really want to know. You told me you needed some time to think about leaving SunClan. It's been several days since then. I know I sound impatient, but...are you ready yet?"

"I understand your impatience," said Minnowtail, chuckling dryly. "It does seem like I'm leading you on about that. This probably

sounds like a lame excuse, but...I'm not ready because I have this...*startlingly* strong gut feeling that I should stay, at least for a little longer. I can't explain it. You'll just—" her whiskers twitched at the irony, "—have to trust me on this one."

Dom chuckled too. "I do. I absolutely do."

"That's what I thought." With some regret, Minnowtail disentangled herself from Dom. "Now, you wait here. I'm going to find you something good to eat."

Chapter 5

Two days later, when Rosethorn and Dawnpaw try to convince Adderstar to attack the rogues...

That gut feeling that ate at Minnowtail like a river weathering its banks was stronger than ever. It was uncanny, almost like StarClan themselves were trying to tell her something through her own instincts. But she knew better than that. Though she couldn't deny StarClan's existence—how else would Clan leaders have nine lives?—she was certain that, in their eyes, she'd earned a place in the Dark Forest by betraying SunClan. They wanted nothing to do with her now.

The thought of being banished to the Place of No Stars when she died was an odd one for Minnowtail. For one, every story she'd heard as a kit about that place described it as an awful, endlessly gloomy place inhabited by shadows of cats, their spirits kept alive only by hateful memories. In other words, a place no cat wanted to end up after death. But at the same time, Minnowtail knew those cats were in the Dark Forest because of their actions. Things they did to their Clan because they despised it. So perhaps the cats there would understand how she felt about SunClan, and welcome her and her hatred.

But then there was the fact that, once she left SunClan for the Twolegplace cats, she wouldn't be a warrior anymore. She wouldn't be part of the Clans at all. Both StarClan and the Dark Forest were Clan afterlives. So if she wasn't a Clan cat...where would she go once she'd taken her final breath? Was there some kind of afterlife for cats outside the Clans? Or would she be doomed to wander the living world as a ghost for eternity?

I don't want that. That's a kind of loneliness nobody deserves.

Minnowtail wasn't dissuaded by these thoughts. She only hoped the loneliness she felt now wouldn't follow her beyond her death. *And I bet wherever I'll be going, that's where the rogues will go too. I wouldn't*

mind at all if I got to spend my afterlife with Dom.

Currently she was lounging outside the warrior den alongside Patchflower, Nightshade, and Forestfire, some of the other warriors attending tonight's Gathering. They wouldn't be departing for a while yet, so most of them were soaking up what little warmth they could from the setting sun. Lazily Minnowtail bent her head to groom her chest. It had been a long time since Gatherings interested her. *Now I couldn't care less whether I go to those things or not!*

Her ear twitched as it caught Nightshade's whisper close by. "Patchflower, look at them. I wonder what that's all about?"

"Looks important," meowed Patchflower in reply. "Though what Rosethorn's doing mixed in with the Clan's authorities is beyond me."

Clan authorities? What're they talking about? Curiously Minnowtail looked up from her grooming. Heading toward Adderstar's den was indeed Rosethorn, accompanied by Dawnpaw, Grayleaf, *and* Beestripe. *Jeez. I wonder what's going on there.*

Out of boredom she decided there was nothing stopping her from a little eavesdropping. She'd listened in on plenty of conversations inside Adderstar's den as a kit. But none of that had ever been of interest to her; it was all boring Clan politics. Maybe she would hear something genuinely interesting for once.

As casually as she could, Minnowtail rose up and strolled in the general direction of Adderstar's cave. As she passed Cherryfur by the fresh-kill pile, the senior warrior queried, "Are you following Beestripe and the rest of them?"

"Er, no," Minnowtail answered, thinking quickly. She feigned an uncomfortable expression. "I've got a bad bellyache. Must've eaten too much earlier. I'll wait until—well, whatever that is—is over, and then tell Adderstar I want to stay behind from the Gathering and rest."

"That's unfortunate. Hope you feel better." Cherryfur dismissed the conversation as quickly as she'd begun it, refocusing on the bony

shrew she had been nibbling. Minnowtail walked on.

She could've laughed out loud at how little Cherryfur had cared. Despite the fact that she'd been fine all afternoon, the ginger she-cat hadn't batted an eye at her excuse. *That's what happens when you don't pay attention,* she snorted silently. *I'm not complaining, though.*

She reached the leader's cave, which the important-looking group of cats had already entered. Minnowtail leaned against one of the boulders in the same place she always did when she eavesdropped as a kit. To onlookers, she seemed like she was only hanging out around the area. But in truth, her ear was facing the cave entrance perfectly so she could hear just about every word the group of cats were saying. Right now, Rosethorn was talking. She sounded distressed, and angry.

"...think they have power over us is a moment they could spend hunting our food or harming our cats. We can't let that happen!"

"I do agree," said Adderstar. "What do you think about this?" he added, supposedly addressing someone else.

Grayleaf spoke next. "Well, it does seem reasonable that we need to teach these rogues a lesson. And I want payback for Pineclaw's death as much as any cat. But I'm just not sure this is the right time for a fight. Leaf-bare is upon us now, and we can't risk any more serious injuries, or deaths. We need all the hunters we can get."

"But what will those hunters do when there's no prey to hunt, because the rogues have taken it all?" Rosethorn retorted. "Starvation is long-term, and there's no retreating from it. It would kill more cats than a battle. And again, things are bound to get worse the longer we let the rogues stay here!"

"That's true," Beestripe meowed. "Injuries aren't the only thing we have to worry about. Prey in leaf-bare is scarce enough without prey-stealing rogues on our tails. We can't let any food slip away from us."

"Yes, starvation could also mean sickness in the Clan," Dawnpaw mewed. Her tone was hesitant. "I agree that injuries at the start of

leaf-bare are a bad thing, but whitecough and greencough are worse. At least having more prey will make the Clan stronger."

"I suppose you're right..." If Grayleaf had said anything else, her words were drowned out by a ringing in Minnowtail's ears.

No, no, no, no, no...this can't happen. They can't do this. Attacking the rogues...

Minnowtail turned her face toward the boulder to hide her expression from other cats in the clearing. Her heart raced, and her breath came in pants of pure fear. If there was a battle...the Twolegplace cats were scrawny from hunger, and according to Dom, their numbers were not nearly as large as SunClan. They would be destroyed. *Dominic...*

As her hearing returned, Rosethorn was speaking again. "Maybe tomorrow, or the day after," she was saying thoughtfully. Adderstar must have asked her when she thought they should launch the attack. "It might seem too soon, but with cats like these, we can't..."

That soon? Oh, no... What if Adderstar actually went through with it? Dominic and everyone he cared about could be gone in a matter of days. Driven away for good, or worse, dead.

I can't let that happen. I won't *let that happen,* she promised herself and every one of those Twolegplace cats. She could get out of attending the Gathering tonight, and find Dom. He could take her to the shelter, and they could work something out. A plan to fight back, or to escape where the SunClan cats wouldn't find them...anything. Anything to save them from this fate they didn't deserve.

"...Minnowtail? Hey, are you alright?"

"Ah!" Minnowtail nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Beestripe's half-confused, half-concerned voice. Grayleaf and Dawnpaw flanked him, also looking bewildered.

"Yeah...sorry," stammered Minnowtail. She feigned another wince. *I guess we'll stick with the bellyache excuse. Especially now that I have a*

real reason to skip the Gathering. "This StarClan-forsaken stomachache makes it hard to focus. I was going to tell Adderstar I needed to skip out on this Gathering."

"Stomachache, eh?" Grayleaf twitched her whiskers wryly. "There has been some good prey lately. You eat a bit too much?"

"Probably," Minnowtail chuckled.

"Well, once you're done here, you can come see me and Dawnpaw before the Gathering patrol sets off. I've got some herbs that'll cure that overnight."

"That sounds great. Thank you."

"No problem." Grayleaf beckoned to Dawnpaw with her tail, and the two began padding back to the medicine den.

Beestripe angled his ears at the cave mouth. "Rosethorn's still in there talking to Adderstar. Just wait 'till they're done."

Minnowtail gave the deputy a respectful nod, and he too padded away.

Alright. She took a deep breath to help calm herself as everything she'd just learned settled in her mind. *Alright. I'll sneak out as early as I can; the more time I have, the better. I need to make this as quick as I can, or else I'll be missing when the Gathering patrol gets back, and they'll surely notice. Just head into the Twolegplace, look for Dom or any of the rogues, and let them take me to the shelter so I can warn them.*

It was certainly easier said than done. But Minnowtail wouldn't hesitate to take the risk.

She started yet again as Rosethorn emerged from the cave, looking surprisingly disturbed. *I wonder what she and Adderstar just talked about.*

Rosethorn's upset expression quickly turned neutral as she spotted Minnowtail. Trying to think of something to say, all she could come up with was, "Is Adderstar in there?"

"Of course." Rosethorn's whiskers twitched. "Why else would I have been in there?"

Minnowtail cringed, partly to look like she was in pain, partly because *why* did she say that, of all things? *That was so dumb.*

"Right," she huffed ruefully. "Sorry, I can't really focus right now. I've got a bad bellyache. Must've been something I ate earlier today. I'm telling Adderstar I can't go to the Gathering."

"Oh. Okay. Hope you feel better." Clearly not giving the matter much thought, Rosethorn strolled off and settled beside Nightshade, who was now alone by the warrior den.

Listen to your echo, Cherryfur, Minnowtail thought, scoffing to herself. It couldn't have been more clear that these cats wouldn't miss her when she was gone if they yowled it to Silverpelt.

She now felt a strong hatred for Rosethorn in particular. She was the one who suggested the attack on the rogues. *Bat killed Pineclaw, and now she thinks she has the perfect excuse to do this.* But she didn't even know how everything went down. She didn't know that it was Pineclaw and Thrushtail's fault that the former was dead, because they'd felt the need to attack Bat and Valery first. All Rosethorn knew was that her former mentor was dead by rogue paws, and she assumed it was completely their fault.

That was what really irked Minnowtail about Clan cats. So narrow-minded, and always assuming they were in the right no matter what. That stupid superiority complex—the idea that their warrior code and Clan blood automatically put them above any cats outside of it—made her blood boil. *I can't believe I'm the only one here who hates it.*

No matter, though. Soon enough she would leave all this behind. Perhaps she could help the Twolegplace cats find a safer place, another forest far away from the Clans. They could live there peacefully, not starving like they were now. And Minnowtail would change her name to something totally new, remake herself until there wasn't a trace of SunClan left in her.

Chapter 6

That night...

Minnowtail was certain she'd figured out what that persistent gut feeling had been. Her instincts had been urging her to stay for a little longer, because if she hadn't, she never would have discovered the plan Rosethorn had suggested to Adderstar. And now here she was, standing at the white fence between SunClan's forest and the Twolegplace, steeling herself for what she was about to do.

This could change absolutely everything, she thought. *The fate of all these cats—both the Clan and the rogues—is coming down to me, right now.*

Minnowtail breathed deep. She was willing to risk it all to give the Twolegplace cats a chance at survival. Because right now, their deaths at the claws of SunClan's warriors were inevitable.

Giving herself a final shake, she raced forward and leaped easily over the fence. She trotted briskly through the familiar Twoleg gardens, keeping her nose up and ears pricked for any sign of cats nearby. *I hope at least* someone *is out this late,* she worried. *I doubt I can find the shelter all on my own.* But unlike the forest, the Twolegplace was lit up by tall poles with Twoleg lights on the top of them. Streetlights, as Dominic told her. So with the streets well-lit, it was plausible that cats would be out and about at night. *I just have to find one, and soon.*

The stony streets and sidewalks were much less familiar to Minnowtail than the gardens. The only other time she'd been this deep into the neighborhood was the last time she'd seen Dom. But she didn't feel the least bit afraid or nervous in this unknown territory. The only fear she felt was for Dom and all his friends and campmates.

Minnowtail scanned the area. The streetlights bathed the pale sidewalks and darker roads in an eerie golden glow. The only sound

was the whisper of a chilly leaf-bare breeze flowing through foliage. She shivered, not only because of the wind, but because it almost felt as if she was the only cat *or* Twoleg here. Like she was standing in the middle of a ghost town. *I guess having Dominic around always made me feel safe.*

Doing her best to shake off that spooked feeling, Minnowtail trotted briskly into the empty street. It seemed there were no Twolegs riding around in their cars this late. She was skeptical about raising her voice in such utter silence, but she didn't have time for wandering aimlessly and hoping she would come across a Twolegplace cat. *I'd probably get lost, anyway.*

Holding her head high, she called out, "Hello? Are there any cats nearby? I need to speak with you, please! I mean no harm!"

She turned in a slow circle, looking for any flickering shadows that could be a cat in hiding. All she saw were those of grass and bushes.

Fox dung. Minnowtail lashed her tail in frustration. Would this really work? *Just keep trying. Louder this time.*

"Is anyone around? This is urgent! I need to speak with—*gah!*"

Minnowtail's word were cut off as something suddenly drove her into the pavement from behind. She felt the skin on her cheek tear as it scraped over the rough surface. Paws pressed down on her shoulders, their claws piercing through and pinning her.

The voice of a tom snarled in her ear. "Stupid wild cat. You're not getting one over on us this time, not with this bee-brained plan!"

"What? No, I'm not—" Minnowtail broke off with a hiss as the tom's claws dug deeper.

"I'd recognize your disgusting scent anywhere after what your friends did to Valery," he spat. "But since they're not here, I suppose I can settle for making *you* pay. A Clan cat is a Clan cat."

Before Minnowtail could respond, he flipped her onto her back. She got a quick look at him—white fur with black patches, round amber eyes narrowed to slits—before she registered that his teeth were

bared and his gaze was fixed on her throat. *Oh, no—*

"Minnowtail! My name is Minnowtail!" she cried.

Instantly the tom's grip loosened, and his mouth snapped shut, eyes widening in recognition. Minnowtail almost went limp with relief. *Thank goodness Dom told everyone about me.*

"Yes, it's me!" she continued quickly. "Dominic is my closest friend. Didn't he ever tell you what I look like, just in case?"

The tom blinked. "Oh...of course. Silver tabby, dark blue eyes...it's definitely you." Hastily he backed away, giving Minnowtail space to get up. "I'm really sorry about that. I heard you, and smelled a wild cat, so..."

"It's alright." Minnowtail shook dust and gravel out of her fur. "You *should* be on alert, after all."

The tom narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Anyway...my name's Bat."

Bat. "Wait, Dom's mentioned you. You...you were with Valery when it all happened. You killed Pineclaw." Minnowtail could hardly believe she was talking to, of all cats, the one that had killed Pineclaw. *Go figure.*

Bat's ears flattened slightly at the mention of Valery. "I did," he growled. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course not," said Minnowtail. It was clear this cat was still shaken by that day. "Pineclaw deserved it." Under her breath she added, "I wouldn't have minded if Thrushtail had died too."

Bat twitched his whiskers. "Well. You're *definitely* Minnowtail. So, why are you here? You said it was something urgent."

"It is. All of you could be in grave danger. SunClan's leader is thinking of invading the Twolegplace and attacking you in retaliation."

Bat's eyes widened again. "Oh, no...Zodiac needs to know about this right away. I'll take you to her. Just help me carry some of the prey

I've caught." He turned and trotted to a nearby bush, waving his tail for Minnowtail to follow suit.

"So you were hunting?" she prompted as she watched him drag fresh-kill out from beneath the bush.

"Yup," Bat mewed. "Dom's not the only one that hunts at night." When he was done, Minnowtail was looking at a squirrel and two shrews, all decently sized for leaf-bare prey.

She was impressed. "Wow, that's a pretty good haul."

"Yeah, well, winter's only just begun," Bat responded. His tone was brisk, but Minnowtail could tell he was only trying to disguise his anxiety. "Every hunter is doing their best. This winter won't be easy for any of us."

"All the more reason to make sure SunClan won't do you any more harm," Minnowtail said determinedly.

"And how do you suppose we do that?"

"I...don't know yet." Minnowtail shook her head. "But we're not going to figure it out standing here, are we?"

"Right." Bat nodded at the squirrel. "You get that, I've got the shrews. Let's go."

With their jaws full, Bat began to lead Minnowtail on a winding path through the maze that was the Twolegplace. She was surprised by his brisk pace; clearly he knew exactly where he was going. *I suppose it's easier when you've lived here for a while.*

She wondered how the rogues saw the forest. Perhaps they saw it the same way she viewed the neighborhood—as a mess of paths and unfamiliar smells. Perhaps, just like her, they felt lost and wondered how any cat was supposed to find their way around. *We're all so confident, until we find ourselves in a totally foreign situation. Once we reach that point...I guess all cats are alike.* But Clan cats were so dead set on believing they were above other cats, they were blind to that simple truth. *I'd like to see them try and be their arrogant selves in a place like this.*

Soon the two came to a moderate stretch of grass, overgrown compared to the neatly trimmed lawns of the Twoleg nests. Nestled in the flora was a large, rundown wooden shed. On its front face, the Twoleg door was shut, but there was a hole gouged into the bottom of the door just big enough for a cat to squeeze through. Minnowtail didn't even need to breathe in to smell the dozens of cats inside.

"Here we are," Bat meowed. "This place has been abandoned by the humans for ages. It's not a bad home. Warm inside, no holes in the roof—as ancient as it looks—and enough room for all of us."

He beckoned Minnowtail with his tail. "Come inside. I'll get Zodiac. Chances are she'll want everyone to listen to what you have to say."

Minnowtail nodded understandingly, following close behind Bat as he padded up to the shelter's entrance and—with his smaller build—easily slipped through. She was curious to know how these cats lived, but also nervous about meeting all of them. *What if some of them still don't trust me?* She comforted herself with the thought that Dom would be with her. As tense as the situation was, she was excited to see him again.

It was much darker inside the shelter, and Minnowtail blinked softly as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The first things she noticed were the large brown boxes turned on their sides, scattered all over the floor. Some of them were lined with Twoleg blankets, and all of them had sleeping cats inside them. *Looks like they used things the Twolegs left lying around to make dens. Resourceful.* There didn't seem to be much organization, though; younger and older cats were mixed together. She did notice, however, that there was one tabby-and-white she-cat with two kits. They had a blanketed box all to themselves. The sight warmed Minnowtail's heart.

See, SunClan? These cats are the furthest thing from the monsters you believe they are. They're just trying to take care of their own. Trying to survive. Why is that so hard for you to see?

And because of the Clan's cruelty, Minnowtail noted that there was no fresh-kill pile to be seen.

While she was taking everything in, the she-cat with kits suddenly raised her head, eyes wide with alarm and nose twitching. Hastily Bat dropped the shrews in his mouth and mewed, "It's okay, Olive, we're safe. This is Minnowtail, Dominic's friend."

The queen, Olive, visibly relaxed. But even so, Minnowtail noticed her striped tail curl protectively around her kits. *I guess I can't blame her.*

"Wait, she's here?" A shocked voice came from one box, turned away from the entrance. Minnowtail recognized it instantly.

"I'm here, Dom!" she called. By now, the commotion was causing every sleeping cat in the shelter to stir.

"Minnowtail!" Dominic emerged from the makeshift den, golden eyes practically glowing in the dark. He sprinted up to her and touched noses with her. Minnowtail felt a wave of happiness just at that tiny touch.

"It's so great to see you," she murmured.

"Back at you," Dom replied. "But what are you doing here in the middle of the night? Tonight's a full moon; isn't SunClan at the Gathering right now?"

"I got out of going," said Minnowtail, "because I discovered something that puts you all in grave danger. We need to figure out what to do, and we don't have much time."

"What's going on out here?"

Another voice joined the conversation, but this time, one Minnowtail hadn't heard since she was an apprentice. Everyone turned their heads toward the back of the shelter to see a lithe she-cat, black fur splotched with white and yellow eyes narrowed with interest.

"Zodiac." Minnowtail recognized the rogues' leader from the first battle between them and SunClan all those moons ago. Not sure what to do, she simply dipped her head. "I'm sorry for intruding, but your cats are in serious danger from SunClan."

All the rogues were now gathered in a ragged circle around Minnowtail and Zodiac, looking on with surprise and alarm. Dom, however, seemed intent on staying right by her side. She deeply appreciated that; all these eyes on her were making her anxious.

Zodiac's pupils were slits now, her ears flattened slightly. "Go on."

"Well...I was eavesdropping on a meeting Adderstar—the Clan's leader—was having with some other cats in the Clan. I heard one of the warriors suggest a surprise attack to drive you away from the forest once and for all. If Adderstar does go through with it, this could happen as soon as tomorrow." Distress involuntarily crept into Minnowtail's voice as she spoke.

Anxious murmurs and furious hisses rippled through the crowd.

"Those selfish, arrogant..."

"...be so cruel and narrow-minded?"

"What are we going to do?"

"...three times as many cats as we do..."

"Calm down, everyone," Zodiac meowed steadily, though her lashing tail gave away her own fury. "Now that we know about this possibility, we can figure out a way to prevent it...or counter it." She turned her sharp gaze back to Minnowtail. "Minnowtail. Did you have any ideas for what we can do?"

"Oh. Er..." Minnowtail hadn't expected to be asked for her thoughts. "Well, if this does happen, I doubt SunClan will stop looking for you until they find—and likely kill—at least *some* of you. Maybe I could lead you to a place in the forest outside of SunClan's territory. They'd never think to look for you there—after all, they don't even know that you're aware of the attack idea. You'd be safe. Although, what you would do afterwards, I'm not really sure of..."

"Okay, wait just a moment." Part of the crowd parted as a big, battle-scarred tabby tom pushed his way to the front. "Should we really trust her? Doesn't her whole plan sound a *bit* suspicious? What if her 'leading us to a safe place' is really leading us to the

actual ambush?" He eyed Minnowtail with great suspicion. "I know I don't trust a hair on her pelt. After all, every one of 'em reeks with her Clan's stink!"

Minnowtail flinched visibly as the rogues began to whisper among themselves again. She was faintly aware of a warmth at her flank disappearing. The next thing she knew, Dominic was standing directly in front of the tabby tom, his hackles raised and eyes narrowed furiously.

"How *dare* you think she is untrustworthy?" he hissed. "Minnowtail has proved time and time again that she is loyal to us over SunClan. I've seen it myself for moons now. She would *never* betray us!"

"Are you sure about that?" the tabby tom retorted. "Or maybe you're too head over heels in love with your little forest friend to see the truth!"

Several cats gasped. Even Zodiac looked surprised, but she seemed to want the two tone to settle this themselves. Minnowtail was frozen, hardly able to believe what was happening. She stared at Dominic, waiting for his response.

His furious gaze remained locked with the tabby. "You're right. I am in love with her. But loving her has not made me blind to the truth. I love her *because* of the truth."

Oh...oh. Minnowtail was stupefied. *He...he loves me. Dom loves me.*

Before her mind could process anything else, Dom stormed on.

"And that truth is, many of us wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for her. Every day she comes to hunt with me, I bring back twice as much prey. Some of you would have starved to death if not for her!"

"It's true." The mother of the two kits spoke up. She was gazing softly at her kits, who were squirming in their sleep back in their makeshift den. "Much of what I've eaten, Dom says was caught by Minnowtail. If not for her, my kits may have not had enough milk to survive."

"And it's not just her hunting, either!" another cat called out. Minnowtail recognized this one: the blue-gray tom she'd pretended to chase off during the first battle between SunClan and the rogues.

"I was there the first time we fought SunClan," he meowed. "So was Minnowtail. I came face-to-face with her. And instead of attacking me, she explained that she was on our side, and didn't want to fight us."

"Exactly," said Dominic. "If any of her Clanmates had overheard that, they might have killed her for treason. She risked herself for us. And since then, she's risked herself again and again. She's doing it right now!"

At last he turned away from the tabby tom and looked at Minnowtail. She gazed back at him, still stunned. His eyes, golden as a sunset, were as familiar as ever, but now there was something new in their depths: undisguised love.

"That's why I love Minnowtail," he said. "That's why I trust her, and it's why all of you should, too. We'll end up dead if we don't."

Zodiac's gaze was unreadable. "Well said," she murmured to Dom. Then, to the tabby tom, she added, "Any more objections, Oscar?"

Oscar stared at Minnowtail a moment longer. When she steadily returned his gaze, he sighed and dipped his head yieldingly, saying nothing more.

"Then let's move on," Zodiac mewed. "As much as I want to keep my cats safe, I believe running from this fight is the coward's way out. We cannot just abandon our home and hope SunClan does not find us again. And as Minnowtail said, what we would do after the fight has been avoided is uncertain. Would we stay in hiding, or return to the neighborhood? Neither would be a good option. In the neighborhood, things will simply return to being how they were before; that fixes nothing. Out in the wild, we would be unequipped to survive. We've always relied on the protection from the elements that the neighborhood provides, and to throw that away right at the start of winter would be a death sentence.

"With all of that in mind, I think the only way to have a chance at saving ourselves is to fight back. As Minnowtail said, SunClan doesn't know we are aware of their plan. This gives us an advantage. We can meet them at the battlefield, get the drop on them. We can show them that they cannot make us back down!"

Zodiac's words were met with caterwauls of agreement from most of the rogues. Minnowtail caught Dominic's eye. He nodded, silently agreeing with Zodiac's plan. She was coming around for it, too. The rogue leader was surprisingly rational and persuasive.

"Yes, you're right about all that," Minnowtail meowed. "This will be risky, especially considering we have no idea how many cats Adderstar will want to bring along, but you're right; it's the only way to try and settle things."

"On our side, every cat that is able to fight will be there," said Zodiac.

"Including me." Minnowtail began to explain exactly what the rogues needed to do. "I'll head back to SunClan's camp for tonight. I won't have a way to get to you after that, so prepare yourselves like you're certain there will be a battle. Tomorrow, if it does happen, I'll make sure I'm on SunClan's battle patrol." She twitched her whiskers deviously. "Of course, I'll be switching sides. I'd be lying if I said I'm not looking forward to the looks on their faces."

One rogue in the crowd murmured, "I'm starting to like her."

"Very well," Zodiac mewed. "We'll be waiting for you along the garden fences as soon as day breaks. Sound good?"

Minnowtail nodded. "Just make sure to disguise your scent throughly. Find some strong-smelling plants—or fox dung if you have to—and roll in it. Otherwise SunClan's warriors will easily pick up your scent."

"Got it. It seems everything is planned now."

Dominic padded up to Minnowtail, stopping beside her. "You should be getting back now," he told her, a worried look in his eyes.

"Someone might have noticed you were gone, or they might still."

"I went for a nighttime walk in the forest to try and shake off my bellyache," Minnowtail said with a shrug.

Dom shook his head fondly. "Fair, but still. I'll see you out." The tip of his tail glided over her back as he led her out of the shelter, and Minnowtail was reminded of what she had discovered tonight. *He loves me.*

It was a startlingly elating thought. The only ones that had ever loved Minnowtail were her family, and that was just because they had to. But here was someone that didn't love her because he had to, but because he *wanted* to, because he felt she was worth it.

And being that special in Dominic's eyes...it was one of the greatest feelings in the world to Minnowtail.

"I wish I could stay with you longer," Dom sighed, halting when they were a good distance from the shelter. "The next time we see each other will be on the battlefield."

"It doesn't have to be," Minnowtail responded hopefully. "Maybe SunClan won't—"

"You and I both know they will, Min."

"...Yeah." She knew he was right. There was really no point pretending nothing would happen. Of course Adderstar would choose to retaliate. The Twolegplace cats killed one of his warriors. She sighed inwardly. *I can't blame Bat, though. He was avenging Valery.* It seemed revenge was a cycle. Would it ever end?

"Are you nervous?" she asked Dom.

"Of course," he answered quietly. "This will be bloody. Cats are going to die." He stared deep into her eyes, as if committing her face to memory. "I might lose you."

"You took the words out of my mouth," Minnowtail whispered. She too was taking in every detail of his face: the soft, dark gray of his fur, tinted blue; the rounded tips of his torn ears; the gentle but

prominent shape of his jaw; and his slightly rounded eyes, like two suns she could stare into forever. Nobody else was, or ever would be, as important to her as he was.

"There's nothing we can do but hope," Dominic murmured. "Hope and fight."

"Hope and fight," echoed Minnowtail softly. She closed her eyes, repeating the phrase over and over in her mind.

Hope and fight. Hope and fight. Hope and fight.

"I need to get going," she sighed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Dom agreed, deep regret in his voice. He licked her cheek, and then Minnowtail was turning and walking away.

Just like that night in the forest, she felt a horribly strong urge to just stay here. The very last thing she wanted to do was leave Dominic.

The realization hit her with the force every tree in the forest falling on her at once...but never in her life had she been so happy.

Minnowtail halted, her eyes watering. "One more thing, Dominic."

"Yes?" His voice was mildly surprised.

Minnowtail whipped back around and raced toward him, fiercely pressing her nose to his. The words came out in a sob.

"I love you too."

Chapter 7

Roughly a moon after the battle...

As much as Minnowtail despised SunClan, she knew forests would always feel a little more like home to her than the neighborhood. Even when she was as used to walking on pavement among buildings as she was to walking on grass among trees, forests offered her the sort of comfort one could only get from the place they were born and raised.

This was what Minnowtail was thinking as she and Dominic reached the white picket fence that divided the forest from the neighborhood. But this was not the same fence that SunClan and the rogues had fought at just over a moon ago. It was a whole other edge of the neighborhood, bordering a forest that was outside Clan territory. A forest where the rogues could finally hunt freely—though the long trips to and fro made every cat's paws ache.

With a huff Dominic dropped the tiny mouse he was carrying in his jaws. Sensing her mate was about to speak, Minnowtail followed suit with her rabbit—a valuable catch she was quite proud of. She almost hadn't seen it skid by, its white fur blending seamlessly with the fresh snow on the ground.

"So, how do you feel?" Dom gazed at her with adoring golden eyes that caught the afternoon sunlight in their depths.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I'm excited, but...at the same time, this almost doesn't feel real."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...this is the first time I've ever had a say in my own identity. My name and my loyalties were decided for me before I even opened my eyes. I *had* to be Minnowkit, then Minnowpaw, then Minnowtail. And I *had* to be a warrior of SunClan. It was all so confining. But now...I'm free, just like that. That's what doesn't seem

real." Saying it out loud helped a little, but the muted elation she felt was still surreal.

"I can't imagine what that's like for you." Dom stepped closer to her, twining his tail with hers. Instantly Minnowtail felt warmer, even with melting snow soaking her paws and back. "But I hope today solidifies everything for you."

"I think it will," Minnowtail replied softly.

Today—as soon as she and Dom returned to the shed, in fact—Minnowtail would grant herself her new name in front of all her new campmates. She'd had the whole moon to think of what she could call herself, and only yesterday had she finally settled on a name. She'd told Zodiac she was ready to be welcomed into the group by her new name; Zodiac had decided it would be done tomorrow. And now today was the day.

"I'm excited to find out what you chose for your name," Dom mewed. "Although I'm going to miss calling you Min."

"I'll miss hearing it," Minnowtail purred. "Anyway, we should be getting back."

The pair picked up their fresh-kill and set off back toward the shed, leaping over the fence.

All of a sudden, Minnowtail recalled something Dom had told her ages ago. *No part of you has to be dictated by someone else. Your name, your behavior, who you're allowed to be friends with...nothing. You'll be free, and it won't be long before my campmates come to love you just like you wanted the Clan to.*

Her eyes watered as pure happiness flooded through her. *It's time for me to be who* I *want to be.*

* * *

They'd healed better than Minnowtail thought they would after the battle with SunClan. Physically, at least. But many cats were still shaken after seeing Poppy bleed out before their eyes. Minnowtail herself was a little rattled, but she reminded herself that revenge

would come soon enough. *You're as good as dead, Rosethorn.*

Olive was chatting with Coal, her mate, while their kits scurried about, occasionally breaking into playfights. Olive blinked warmly at Minnowtail and Dominic as they passed, a gesture Minnowtail returned. Oscar and Theo nodded briefly at them. Prim and Haley were hanging around the fresh-kill pile, which had begun to grow at last. When Minnowtail and Dominic deposited their kills, the two she-cats mewed greetings to them and scurried around the shed, calling for everyone to gather around.

"Looks like everyone was waiting for us," Minnowtail meowed to Dom as she sat in the center of the shed floor.

"Of course," he responded. "They're all excited for you. You've become pretty popular." He quickly licked her ear. "I'm gonna go sit now. Congrats, Min. You deserve this more than anyone."

Minnowtail purred as she watched her mate pad away to sit by Theo. By now most of the group was gathered in a ragged circle around her, though Olive was still persuading her kits to sit still. Unlike the first time she'd been here, she did not feel anxious with so many cats looking at her. Not now that their faces were all familiar to her.

Zodiac emerged from the shadows of the back corner of the shed, accompanied by Bat, who broke off to sit with the rest of the crowd. Cats parted to make a path to the center of the circle for Zodiac. There was warmth in the rogue leader's eyes as they met Minnowtail's. *Even Zodiac is fond of me,* she thought, surprised and touched.

The murmurs of the crowd faded to silence. Zodiac's eyes flitted over all of them before coming to Minnowtail once more. "Let's begin," she meowed.

"Minnowtail is, as I think we all agree, unique among all of us. Of course, not many of us were born into this group. Some of us were living on our own in the neighborhood. Others were housecats. But Minnowtail came from the wild cats in the forest. SunClan.

"After all that transpired between us and SunClan, we have come to despise every hair on every one of their pelts. But Minnowtail here was the one exception. Dominic befriended her moons ago, seeing that she was unlike the selfish, cruel, and narrow-minded cats she lived among. She was selfless, kind, and empathetic, risking her life day after day to help us. Many of us owe her our lives. And in time, she discovered a new home within our group. A place where she can have freedom, and be surrounded by cats who appreciate and care for her.

"We have all gladly welcomed her in, but as you know by now, there is one last thing Minnowtail wishes to do for herself. The name she currently bears is the name given to her by SunClan. Today she will change it to something *she* chose, to break the final chain tying her to them.

"So, Minnowtail..." Zodiac gazed inquiringly at her. "What will your new name be?"

Minnowtail breathed deep. One simple sentence was all she was going to say, but it meant so, so much more to her. She met Dominic's eyes for a moment; he nodded encouragingly. Blinking at him in return, Minnowtail looked back at Zodiac.

"Ivy," she said. Her voice rang out strong and proud. "My name is Ivy."

Silence followed her words as her campmates absorbed them. Even Zodiac said nothing, simply watching her with quiet approval. And then:

"Ivy!"

Dom yowled her name joyously, obviously proud to be the first one to call her by her new name. The rest of the rogues wasted no time joining in. "Ivy! Ivy! Ivy!"

Immediately Ivy thought of how similar this was to apprentice and warrior ceremonies in the Clans. But the difference was that the happiness those ceremonies had brought her was *nothing* compared to the sheer ecstasy she was feeling right now. *Ivy. My name is Ivy.*

"Congratulations, Ivy," mewed Zodiac, her voice lower than the caterwauls. "I'm glad to have you as a part of this group."

"I'm glad to be here," Ivy responded, unable to keep a purr out of her voice.

The next several moments were a blissful blur of congratulations from her campmates. At last she came face-to-face with Dom, who brushed his cheek across hers. Ivy could feel his purr from that one small touch.

"Ivy," he breathed. "I love it."

"It's a lot shorter than Minnowtail," Ivy joked.

"For sure." Dom tilted his head. "Is that why you chose it?"

"Kind of. It was more like a bonus reason."

"So what was the real reason?"

She lifted her chin. "Ivy plants don't need the sun to thrive."

* * *

That evening, after sharing the rabbit she'd caught with some friends, Ivy slipped out of the shed for some fresh air. Hundreds of stars—she'd almost thought of them as Silverpelt—shimmered in the pitch black sky. Twoleg street lamps nearby gave off an orangish light that reminded Ivy of a sunset.

She padded out into the grass and sat down, raising her head to gaze at the stars. *I wonder if they really are StarClan warriors. I wonder if any of them are watching me now.* After all, now that her warrior name was gone, the only thing left of her SunClan identity was her blood. And she'd change that, too, if she could.

She wondered how Shadowpool was doing, and how Duskheart and Shinefur had reacted to the news that their daughter was gone. She had never felt that close to her parents, so she didn't miss them, but she did miss Shadowpool a little. She had cared about him, and she had felt a twinge of guilt and regret seeing the devastated look on

his face as she switched sides at the battle. But there was nothing she could do now but hope he could be happy in her absence. *As I'm sure everyone else in the Clan is,* she thought bitterly.

At that thought, the image of Rosethorn popped into her mind. Now *she* was a cat that made Ivy's blood boil. Adderstar had not died from his wounds after the battle, she was certain of that. Perhaps he had lost one of his Clan leader lives, but even then, he still had more left. That did not justify Rosethorn murdering Poppy, a good cat with only one life to spare. How Rosethorn was so adamant that she did the right thing was beyond Ivy.

She had thought once that revenge was a cycle. As long as one side retaliated, the other would always want the last laugh. And though she didn't want SunClan to strike back at the rogues once again, she *did* want revenge. Badly. *And surely I'm not the only one...*

The faint sound of something sliding through the jagged entrance to the shed jolted Ivy out of her thoughts. She turned to see Dom approaching her, his eyes practically glowing in the dark. She softened a little.

"I just wanted to check on you," he said, almost whispering. That was a little thing Ivy loved about him—he spoke quieter when he was outside at night, without even realizing it himself. It was like his subconscious didn't want to disturb the nighttime silence. "Did you want to be alone?"

"No, come on over." Ivy beckoned him with her tail. He sat beside her, just close enough for their pelts to brush.

"What were you thinking about?" he prompted.

"The battle," Ivy answered quietly. "I was thinking that Poppy's death was unjust, and we can't just let SunClan get away with it."

"You know I feel the exact same way," Dom murmured. "And so do a lot of the others. But...maybe we *have* to let it go, for the sake of the whole group. If we retaliate, SunClan is just going to get back at us again. We know that."

"Yeah, I do know. Which is why I'm thinking we need to do something *big*. Something that those fox-hearts won't be able to get back at us for."

"We can't wipe them all out, if that's what you're thinking."

"No, I know that's impossible," Ivy huffed. She thought hard, searching for anything major that could be used against SunClan. As she racked her brain, her eyes drifted to the fiery glow of a faraway street lamp.

Fiery. Suddenly there was something at the edge of her thoughts, a long-buried memory resurfacing. Ivy reached for it...

And there it was. She was an apprentice, out hunting with Thumpstep. She remembered killing the pigeon; she remembered Thumpstep being unimpressed because of the way she'd killed it. His lecture about the importance of thanking StarClan for prey...

It may be greenleaf, but all our prey could still be gone in a matter of days. Disease could taint it, a fire could kill it all...

A fire.

Ivy's thoughts were suddenly racing faster than a car down the street. Much of the forests' greenery was gone because of leaf-bare. The land was at its most flammable. *Coal.* Olive's mate. He'd named himself after the coals in the pits that Twolegs often lit fires in. The pits were surrounded by stones to keep the fire from spreading...but those stones could be dislodged with enough muscle...

A fire!

"Hey, Dom?" Ivy had expected her voice to be shaky, but to her own surprise, it was steady, laced with glee.

"Yes?"

"I think I just had the perfect idea."